

Pokhran II is subject to discussion

Current Science must be complimented for its courage in providing a forum for debate on sensitive and far-reaching issues such as India going nuclear. This is indicative of the country's democratic fabric and also underlines the social obligations of the scientific community. It shows we are a mature society that is willing to take stock. Several views have appeared on the pros and cons of Pokhran II. The technical details of the studies associated with the explosions have been sufficiently documented to present to the global scientific community the state-of-the-art in this country as well as the willingness of our scientists to share their findings.

I was somewhat taken aback by both the substance and the tone of V. V. S. Sarma's counterpoint (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 7-8). Sadly, Sarma's description of S. R. Valluri's viewpoint (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 1181-1183) as 'illogical, incoherent and incorrect' appears to be misplaced to the extent that it may actually apply to his own 'counterpoint'.

Sarma appears to have little regard for the capacity of the scientific community for introspection, which by definition must be detached. If Sarma believes 'most of these scientists have their own political biases', he may actually be implying one in his own position. Euphoria is always initial and always reflexive. Every Indian (presumably including Valluri) was justifiably proud of the achievement of our scientists. What may have been misplaced was the jingoism, which worried many in and out of the country.

Sarma claims that Pokhran II 'gives a new equilibrium position in the world, where India's concerns carry a greater weight'. Granted this is true, it would follow that scientific activity *does* have profound implications. It would logically follow that the scientific community ought to consider its role in creating weapons of mass destruction. Sarma is absolutely right when he says that 'a country of our size should not be allowed to be bullied by the virtual super-power'. But he may be absolutely wrong to think that the solution lies in weaponization – of any kind. If the US appears to suck up to the Chinese, it is because of the market

potential. Quite simply, success on the economic front would be essential not only for the country, but also for Pokhran III. If we can make our country economically strong, a seat on the Security Council would follow naturally. The erstwhile Soviet Union proved that the pursuit of military strength at the cost of economic well-being is a recipe for disaster. Being home to the majestic Bengal tiger, we surely do not wish to remain a paper tiger.

Sarma correctly points out our failure when we abandoned Tibet. But this point has been made out of context to the issue being discussed. Even granted it is acceptable, he appears to be questioning the Nehru government's foreign policy – something he later says scientists must not get involved with. It may appear childish to Sarma to compare the costs of Navodaya schools and atomic weapons. Perhaps we should ask our children or that vast majority of our countrymen who cannot read this correspondence. The general public may not be upset about the SPG protection given to politicians, but the associated public nuisance certainly does not evoke much sympathy.

Sarma appears to be confused about decision making on Pokhran II. Most political analysts think (and poll statistics indicate) that in successive elections, the people have voted parties *out* of power, rather than *into* power. Under the circumstances, it would be far fetched to imagine that the people's mandate was involved.

Sarma states that Valluri's observation that we started the nuclear race in South Asia represents 'a dangerous doctrine'. The calendar would suggest that Valluri was merely making a chronological observation. Tom Lehrer, an American satirist (and mathematics professor) had this to sing about the 'US doctrine' in the late sixties:

First we got the Bomb and that was good,
'Cause 'we love peace and motherhood'.
Then Russia got the Bomb but that's OK,
'Cause the balance of power's
maintained that way.

France got the Bomb, but don't you
grieve,

They're on our side (I believe),
China got the Bomb, but have no fears,
They can't wipe us out for at least five
years!

Indonesia claim that they
Are gonna get one any day.
South Africa wants two that's right!
One for the black and one for the white

Egypt's gonna get one too
Just to use on You know who!
So Israel's getting tense
Wants one in self defence

Luxembourg is next to go
And who knows, maybe Monaco!
We'll try to stay serene and calm
When Alabama gets the Bomb!

Who's next? Who's next? Who's next?

Sarma's suggestion that scientists should refrain from airing their views on matters of public concern indicates an inherent lack of faith in our democratic set-up. In spite of our failings and weaknesses, we have demonstrated to the world that we are a diverse and vibrant democracy. Any attempt to snuff out a dissenting viewpoint would indicate weakness, rather than strength. Debate must be encouraged in the hope that people who eventually make decisions are able to weigh the pros and cons.

Indeed, foreign policy is best left to the specialists. However, the 'specialists' must reflect the concerns and aspiration of the people at large. The scientific community is not a bunch of robots key to perform pre-programmed function without question, without discussion and without a conscience. The scientific community also pays its taxes and has to bring up its children, much like our other countrymen. We are entitled to express our opinions which in no way reflect our patriotism or our integrity. If they were not true, we would not have to subscribe to *Current Science* – 'Anim Farm' and '1984' would do.

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